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“Raining” in Your Emotions as a Student Affairs Professional

Chantel J. Vereen

Content Warning: The content provided within the following narrative involves student death and depressive episodes that may cause impact for some readers.

As younger generations of student affairs professionals become more involved in the field and aware of their mental health identity, there appears to be a disconnect between young professionals and those who are older and keep the state of their mental health hidden. The author questions whether young professionals' openness about their mental health identity lines up with the institutional/general professional expectations for dealing with emotional trauma in their field. In this narrative, I discuss my understanding of how student affairs professionals encounter tragedy while holding their own mental health wellness. I will further delve into how professionals can feel restricted in their ability to voice their concerns about mental health, especially because of the fear of judgement. I will be exploring this experience through the story of my life as a live on professional in residence life between Fall 2018 and Spring 2019.

Keywords: anxiety, depression, mental health, residence life, student affairs professionals, student death, trauma

When It Rains...

September 2018

Being on call already feels stressful for live-on student affairs professionals, specifically residence life administrators. The calls at 3am letting you know that there is another student transport, or that a ceiling caved in from the rain. Or that there is a peacock on the loose and no one knows how to get a hold of it (or how it got there in the first place). The on-caller feels this unease mixed with light annoyance when the phone rings - residence life professionals can admit that - but it is

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different when the call stops everything in your world.

I was the on-call professional at my former institution who received the news of a student death on campus - the first in five years. I was one of the first student affairs professionals to know. A member of a fraternity, a student ambassador, a soon-to-be engineer, dead in a residence hall less than one minute away from my front door. It happened on a Sunday; the student staff members in my department were having a luncheon 100 feet away from the site. We smiled in pictures that never made it to social media, and we inhaled homemade food that would suddenly become nauseating. The feeling of loss was difficult; the death of any student is difficult to digest. After the call, we gathered our professional staff over at the residence hall. I remember feeling the numbness rise through me as I passed a member of the coroner's office. A swift uneasiness laid into my skin and tightened it. There, in the lobby, was the student's girlfriend: yelling in agony, red in the face. She could not get off the ground. And then moments later, the administrators and myself noticed that she was one of our own student staff members.

That is when the darkness in me started to creep out of my skin. The numbness took over my whole face. One minute I was in the lobby and then the next I was in my office crying to one of my supervisors. I did not know where the time went or how I got there. I left the office and went straight into a staff meeting, comforting the residents who needed to talk and supporting them in the best ways that I knew how. The upper administration of my department sent flowers and wrote me a "Thinking of You" card. "It's going to be okay. You should be okay," was something I heard constantly from my coworkers and supervisors.

Should be okay. I should be.

But inside, the darkness curled up and became dormant. *I'm safe for now. I got this, I said to myself, walking outside into the rain. I should be okay. What's the worst that could happen after this?*

**If we are fortunate
We are given a warning
If not,
There is only the sudden horror,
The wrench of being torn apart;
Of being reminded
That nothing is permanent,
Not even the ones we love,
(Rickerby, 2015)**

November 2018

It was the Sunday after Thanks-taking (formerly known as Thanksgiving) and the on-call phone felt like it weighed twenty pounds against my face at nine in the morning. The phone call was going on for four minutes. My television flooded my living room with color. On the other line was Campus Safety Dispatch, letting me know about an angry brother who was yelling about no one reaching out to his dying brother. As I tried to coach the dispatcher over the phone, the feeling of annoyance crept up under my skin. I could hear her eyes glazing over on the phone.

“I don’t even know the name of his brother. I don’t think he even goes here. But we can’t say that, right? Are you sure he’s in the system?” the dispatcher said. I wanted to pull up my Housing Director software but my laptop was three inches too far from where my free hand was.

“This honestly could be a joke or just a big misunderstanding. What’s the name that the brother calling used?” I asked, placing a piece of sweet potato pie on my plate for breakfast.

She says the name.

My ears began to ring uncontrollably. I heard the rain start to pick up outside of my apartment windows. It was loud enough that it felt like it was inside my head. It was my student. My staff member. Robbie. Our Robbie who would call out anyone without batting an eye. Our Robbie. Who would join our staff bonding ritual of watching American Horror Story on Wednesday nights even though he hated the show. Our Robbie. Who would write research papers on his cell phone right before staff meeting. Our Robbie. Who would wear slap bracelets and a shirt that had the word “savage” written all over it. Our Robbie. In the corners of my living room, I noticed the cement walls were grayer than usual.

The sound of the rain becomes louder and louder. I blink and I am in my office again, looking at my supervisor. Her face and neck are turning red after I tell her the news. I blink again and I am in a staff meeting. The air has been sucked out of the room. My students look like they are in shock. I do not hear anything but the tapping of the rain. My vision is blurring on the ends and then suddenly, I am at the hospital with a mask over my face. Looking at a face that I do not recognize. Jaundiced skin, thicker hair, bulging eyes. The pouring rain is turning to ice. My vision blurred from the tears and I am at a funeral. My staff surrounds me and I feel the warmth of their love build around me. But they are trembling, not knowing what will come next.

**...One by one,
We lose those ...
Into the dark ravine.
(Rickerby, 2015)**

March 2019

I wake up. A text message saying, “It’s happened again.” The campus climate drops to extremely low temperatures. The thunder rumbles in the distance.

It Pours...

I think of my depression as “living in the black and white.” When I was struggling with my own mental health, there were moments when my black and white life was a still photo. It is hard to say when my depression and grief began to manifest. It is hard to identify the exact moment when, somehow, the lights turned off in my brain. But I knew things were off when I was sitting on the couch.

It was morning and, like a robot, I woke up, dressed, put on a coat of makeup, brewed some coffee, and got ready to start my Saturday right. They were easy plans: breakfast downtown with friends, a trip to the grocery store, a nail appointment, and a party. I sat in my living room; my clock read 8:30 in the morning. A news article about a student death at an unknown institution was on my feed. I thought of them. Robbie, Ethan, and Jack. The phone calls. The funeral. The hospital. The rainstorm. The sounds of sobs coming in and out of the department office. And just like a wave, the sound of the rain floods my ears. I leaned back into the couch as my body stiffened. The black and white fills my eyes again and suddenly, I feel the cool breeze of night slip through my window. It has been 12 hours and I have not moved from my spot. I am still in my dressy clothes but my face is caked with tears, my eyelids swollen. My phone barely has any battery. There are missed calls, texts, and direct messages on social media. I leave my phone turned off and in a nightstand. I go to bed with ease. This cycle repeats three more times unbeknownst to my staff and my colleagues. Everyone thought I was fine. My eyes grew bright and large to stop the tears from flowing. I attended department meetings, barely writing anything down but nodding with a smile. I was not sure what I needed but I realized that I was not on any of the professional leadership’s radar until things were the darkest I ever thought they could have gotten. But how can one speak of their depression in a place where mental health was never given a dialogue? How can you tell people it is going to rain when their weather forecast says something different?

Do You Need an Umbrella?

Grieving is difficult in the field of student affairs, but identifying as someone who is not neurotypical makes grief even more impossible to navigate. There is an emphasis on self-care within our culture and we push hard to integrate it within our practice, profession, and lives (Gladieux & Boettcher, 2019). We give our all to the people we care for the most. The students. Our students. Our Robbies, our Jacks, our Ethans.

**So, we must cherish them
Without reservation.
Now. Today. This minute.
(Rickerby, 2015)**

As student affairs practitioners, we learn to listen actively and allow students to be open and vulnerable. We think critically and ask probing questions of our students to support them in finding their truth. We realize the impact of those conversations when they come up. But which student affairs professionals are trained to support the student affairs professionals? Student affairs administrators who are well versed within student affairs may not be equipped to help support their co-workers and in times of grieving. I can only speak to my own experience and the support for me was low grade until my trauma was deeper and darker. As one of the youngest administrators in my department during my time as a live-on professional, there were several moments where reining in my emotions was necessary to get the job done. As a student affairs professional, you can only build people up and break down yourself. It felt like I had to hold my breath. But grieving is like breathing. And how long can one hold that? The lack of support and knowledge when it came to mental health awareness within that institution made me realize that not all student affairs professionals were willing or ready to have conversations about mental illness and trauma. Being open about my depression and anxiety in the workplace was deemed “discomforting” by my supervisors.

As they progress through the field of higher education, senior administrators may not learn the theory of grief management. As the progression of younger generations blossom in the student affairs field, the ability to vocalize their needs for their mental health and personal wellness strengthens. In my experience, I was able to navigate conversations regarding my mental health identity by interviewing at institutions that were open to discussing their supportive measures are during my job search.

Talking about my experience makes it real. It reminds me that I have lived through grief. That the grief is a puzzle for me. It seems complex when it is in

pieces. But with patience the larger picture will make sense. That is healing. Grief is not lying in the dark somewhere, it is sitting with me in my office. It is on my shoulder in the classroom. It is walking with me on my way to campus. Moving forward, I preface that dialogue with supervisors. I know that they have their own boundaries that they must hold, or potentially trauma that may resurface for them. I think about the impact that my story could have on my supervisors. I worry that being open and vulnerable may be too much. But the parts of me that are broken down, that are black and white, they are the important parts to feel. It is my identity. It is salient. This is me.

And this is normal.

Future Forecasts

If you find yourself dealing with trauma within your student affairs journey, consider what areas of growth would be most helpful for you. Be honest with your boss and co-workers. Set up windows of time to grieve amid your routine. If you get overwhelmed, re-center through breath (Spector, 2019).

**We will still cry.
We will always cry.
But with loving reflection
(Rickerby, 2015)**

In a new institutional environment, I express who I am and where I have been. There is no reason to shy away from my own narrative. Know that grieving takes growth. You have time. We as professionals need to normalize honest conversations about mental health in the workplace. If we allow our own healing, we affirm and uplift others to do so for themselves. We must create space to live through this publicly and unapologetically (Wicks, 2015). Showing up and working in higher education means being able to vocalize your vulnerability and authenticity. Being human and emotional is being a professional.

Managing and accepting depression and your trauma does not make you sick. It does not make you “too weak” for the position. In higher education, we are allowed to have loud emotions. You are able to let the rain pour and feel those raindrops on your face. But when the emotions are drowning you, reach for support. Not all practitioners can practice vulnerability but they need to be the support that you need. We praise our students when they allow themselves to grieve, process, cry, and find themselves. Why can we not praise one another for doing the same? The way we push professionals to think that their emotional energy should continuously be fully charged is unsustainable. Let us breathe, let us cry. Let us take a mental health day to find the balance of human and professional.

And when it rains, give us an umbrella. Help us inside. Wait until the storm passes, and let us continue on our path. Because we can.

**And some survive,
...Somehow, some survive all that and,
Like a flower opening after a storm,
They slowly begin to remember the one they lost
In a different way...
And that is how we survive.
That is how the story should end.
That is how they would want it to be.
(Rickerby, 2015)**

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